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**Homeless in Hollywood:  
Deconstructing the Homeless Myth in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema**

by

**Benjamin Young**

**A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through Communication Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an exploration into the ways that homeless people are stigmatized in the media, with particular emphasis on the misrepresentation of homelessness in contemporary Hollywood narrative films. Using a combination of semiotic film theory and ideological analysis, I examine the film language that is used to construct these myths and place them within a larger political context. In doing so, I inspect the relationship between the corporate Hollywood structure and the attitudes they reflect about homelessness. Based on the results of my analysis, I have produced a film that explores an alternative representation to the dominant Hollywood perspective.

## **Dedication**

**I dedicate this thesis to my best friend Johanna for her continued support and endless encouragement.**

## **Acknowledgements**

My wholehearted gratitude goes out to my entire thesis committee for their infinite patience and critical guidance.

I would also like to give a special thanks to my parents for their everlasting encouragement throughout my academic career.

In addition, my full appreciation extends to my entire production crew, without which I would be lost.

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## **Introduction**

Before introducing my thesis, I would like to share a personal anecdote about my life experiences with homelessness. I come from a very large and complex family and as hard as my parents worked to support us, I learned at a young age what it meant to live modestly. As difficult as it was, my lack of material wealth helped instill a deep sense of value and appreciation for all that I did have. However, it wasn't until recently that I learned what it truly meant to lose "everything".

It all happened so quickly. In the beginning of the week, I was contacted by my employer and informed that the summer camp I was going to be teaching at had folded due to exceptionally low registration rates. With only two weeks notice and a tremendous amount of debt to manage, I was left scrambling to find a job. A few days later, I noticed that all of my books and clothes had grown mouldy. Subsequently, there was a widening crack in the foundation of the house, directly under my room; this same crack resulted in an immediate infestation of centipedes. By mid week, I was stunned and shaken but the worst had yet to come. A month earlier, my landlord had moved in a mysterious roommate without telling anyone. Shortly after, everything in the house began to go missing. It was during this same week that my other roommates and I decided to confront him about it. This confrontation quickly escalated into a knife fight showdown that had to be diffused by the police. By the end of the week, I was in complete shock. It was at this point that I was informed of a failing grade and the subsequent end to my academic career.

In one week, my life had crumbled. I lost my job, my house, clothes and books, as well as my academic standing. The rug was literally swept out from under me. If it weren't for the strong support system that helped me get back onto my feet, I definitely would have been one step away from living on the streets. It was at that point that I truly realized how easy it is for anyone to become homeless. One week I was a Master's student researching and writing about homelessness, the next week, I was almost homeless myself.

After enrolling in the program, I knew immediately that I wanted to make a film about homelessness. While growing up in downtown Toronto, I was always saddened by the rising number of visibly homeless people there were in the city. So when the opportunity presented itself, I felt very strongly that this was a group of disenfranchised people who were in desperate need of an assisted voice. However, because homelessness is an exceptionally diverse crisis with a large assortment of contributing factors, my research focuses on how homelessness is portrayed in the media, with particular emphasis on the misrepresentation of homelessness in Hollywood narrative films. Hence the title of my thesis, *Homeless in Hollywood: Deconstructing the Homeless Myth in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*.

Through my research, I have conducted an ideological multiperspectival analysis that explores the ways in which homeless people are misrepresented in contemporary Hollywood films. In consideration to cinema's lengthy past, the word contemporary is used in relation to films that have been produced within the past twenty years. Based on the results of my analysis, I have produced a film that explores an alternative representation to the dominant Hollywood perspective.

Using a combination of semiotic film theory and ideological analysis, my research examines the film language that is used to construct these myths and place them in a larger political context. In doing so, the relationship is revealed between the corporate Hollywood structure and the attitudes they reflect about homelessness. In order to develop an established foundation of relevant theoretical background, my research draws from a variety of theorists; including Stuart Hall's ideas on stereotypes and representation, Karl Marx's theory of ideology, Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony as well as Ferdinand de Saussure's theories on semiotics.

In regards to my analysis, Douglas Kellner's multiperspectival approach is used to examine the ways in which homelessness is portrayed in the films *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Muccino, 2006), *The Fisher King* (Gilliam, 1991), *Trading Places* (Landis, 1983), *Big Daddy* (Dugan, 1999), *Life Stinks* (Brooks, 1991) and *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (Mazursky, 1986). Through my analysis, I dissect the cinematic structures that are used to represent each homeless character and establish any similarities, parallels or reoccurring themes that may arise between each film.

## **Homelessness in Canada**

Homeless representation in the media is an extremely important topic to explore because at the moment, homelessness in Canada has grown to become a very serious issue. "More than 200,000 Canadian men, women and children will experience homelessness this year. At least 10,000 will sleep outdoors. Another 2.5 million Canadians in rental housing are on the brink of homelessness" (Crowe, A.18). Unfortunately, it is families with children who are the fastest growing group among the homeless. "Seven thousand children, including babies, will pass through Toronto shelters this year. In 1998, Canada named homelessness a national disaster because the conditions met the criteria" ("The Hideous Crime of Homelessness." A.18). The majority of the problem stems from poor government policy decisions, such as the withdrawal from funding new social housing, reductions in social assistance benefits and a lack of community based mental health support systems to help people who have been discharged from institutions. "This is compounded by a scarcity of rental vacancies and a lack of affordable housing in Toronto" (Hiller, A.19). Due to the severity of the situation, the public needs to be made aware of the issues that contribute to homelessness as opposed to the myths and stereotypes that are continually perpetuated by the media. This is a group of people who have been positioned at the very bottom of the social ladder, they are voiceless and without hope. Unfortunately, the homeless population will continue to be misrepresented until a change occurs in the way the issues are being portrayed to the public.

"It has been said that the quality of a society can be judged by the state of its prisons as well as the facilities it offers to its poorest and most helpless groups" (Morris, 96). If that is the case, then Canada should be very ashamed. It is not a mystery that housing is a mandatory requirement needed to help foster a healthy society. Without shelter, one is completely void of all security as well as the necessary means for creating a healthy and productive life. In 1993, the Federal government cancelled all new spending towards the national housing program. Two years later, the Federal cancellation was joined by an equally devastating cut to all provincial housing.

That is what happened in 1995 when “the Conservative government of Mike Harris cut 17,000 units of housing that were already under development. Units that could have housed up to 40,000 people, including families with children” (Crow, 12). Other cuts to welfare and Employment Insurance as well as policies that make it easier to evict tenants have created a devastating backlash to the economically challenged. Tens of thousands of people have been forced into substandard housing, into overcrowded and inadequate temporary shelters, as well as onto the streets.

Today, having a job does not provide the same protection it once did against falling into the shelter system. “A mom with two kids employed full time at minimum wage makes just over \$1,000 a month before tax deductions while the average two-bedroom apartment rents for \$1,037” (Gillespie, B.03). This means that thousands of low-income families are now living on the brink of homelessness. Rent is high and there is not enough subsidized housing to accommodate all those who are in need. “Grim statistics show that roughly 100,000 households are on the waiting list for subsidized housing in a city where only a few hundred new units of low-cost shelter are built in a year” (Diebel, B.01). This means that many families are finding themselves having to choose between feeding their kids and paying the rent. “It is amazing how easy it is, at any time, for low-income families to fall into homelessness, says Fiona Murray, a manager with the city’s Community and Neighbourhood Services, which operates the shelter system. There is simply no slack” (Diebel, B.01).

The homeless situation is worsening at an alarming rate, as the factors needed to resolve these issues remain unchecked. “What we have witnessed in Canada is the government’s prolonged reliance on volunteer groups to provide increasingly complicated types of aid, with no sign of proper funding for the social service sector, let alone housing relief” (Crowe, 15). It is evident that these conditions will continue to escalate until they have been effectively tackled. With a growing number of the population living without adequate shelter, it is important to note that the only commonality homeless people share is their lack of a permanent residence. People who are poor are increasingly marginalized and stigmatized.

“This translates into prejudice, hate crimes, and hate legislation. Our language about homelessness reflects this” (Crowe, 29). These views of fear and anger towards the homeless can be detected in the opinions expressed by the current media.

### **Homelessness in the Media**

It is important to examine the media’s representation of various social and ethnic groups for a variety of reasons. “Of primary importance is the acknowledgment that the media do not merely report events—media reports are assumed by many observers to be representations of reality” (Lind and Danowski, 109). Unfortunately, most people are very unfamiliar with the issues that influence homelessness; therefore their limited understanding is created from what they see on the street, as well as, the minimal exposure they get from the media. In recent years, it has become socially acceptable to place responsibility of poverty and homelessness on the shoulders of the individual who faces life on the streets. More people are coming to think of the poor as members of an underclass, undeserving of our support and as victimizers who want to con the hardworking public out of their wealth. It is understandable in some ways that the general population might begin to support such ideas as we are inundated with these messages of blame from the media.

Regardless, it is important to note that the homeless population consists of a diverse range of representatives; some of which are workers displaced by economic changes, or workers who do not work enough hours to qualify for Employment Insurance, to single parent families, battered women with children, runaway youth, elderly people on a fixed income, recent immigrants and refugees, people who have been evicted, people who have been de-institutionalized or people who may be experiencing a personal crisis, the list goes on. These are the unfortunate groups who have yet to break away from the stereotype.

Sadly, the homeless people in our society have trouble attracting positive news coverage. “They end up on the front pages of newspapers and on newscasts most often when they are involved in a violent crime, either as criminals or as victims” (Reynalds, 1).

This trend is due to what the media call “compassion fatigue” among the mainstream public. In which, “stereotypical portraits of homeless people as skid-row alcoholics and happy wanderers seem to be replaced with a threat to the society” (Whang and Min, 95). When they are not being framed as criminals, homeless people are frequently presented as mentally ill substance abusers, often in poor health and suffering from contagious disease.

The crux of the issue develops when “the stigmatized image of the homeless that the audience receives is not countered by an alternative image encouraging sympathy and support” (Reynolds, 21). If the public is continually presented with one side of an argument, then it is only natural for them to adopt that opinion as their own. For example, in a narrative analysis of ninety news magazine articles and eleven CBS news stories about the homeless appearing between 1980 and 1990, it was concluded that the overall tone of the news coverage suggests that the homeless are “ungrateful victims of individual weakness or personal choices who have come to depend too heavily on public charity and service” (Lind and Danowski, 110). Although these few studies present conflicting findings as to whether the media attribute the responsibility for being homeless to the individuals themselves or to external social factors, the extent to which the homeless are presented is heavily stigmatized, “the bulk of the research has determined that most media portrayals blame homelessness on the homeless and often depict the homeless as deviant” (Lind and Danowski, 110).

With a constant barrage of negative press, it is no wonder the homeless community continues to garner a “bum rap”. Especially considering how the media, and television in particular, constitutes such a major source of cultural meanings and interpretations in society. The media reinforce our notions of what is right and wrong, moral and amoral. As such, it stands to reason that when the media ignore a specific cultural group, most audience members will not be particularly well informed about them. It is under these conditions that negative stereotypes thrive.

## Homelessness in Film

The perpetuation of homeless stereotypes in motion pictures is an issue that has existed since the inception of the medium. Some of the very first films ever to be made featured a number of appearances by a stock character commonly referred to as the 'tramp'. "The motion picture debut of the comic tramp occurred in June 1897, when the American Mutoscope Company made *The Tramp and the Bathers*, a film in which the tramp steals the clothes of a man who is swimming in a small lake" (Fuller, 166). To early movie audiences, the tramp represented a personification of the continuously dispossessed under-class man who failed to assimilate into society.

It is no surprise that "the earliest tramps in our movies were often villains" (Boyer, 80). Frequently conveyed as thieves or burglars, "it wouldn't be until Charlie Chaplin that the tramp would become a generally positive figure" (Boyer, 80). Undoubtedly, Charlie Chaplin turned the homeless stereotype upside down. "While prior to his presentations, most movies depicted tramps as villains, Chaplin's efforts painted yet another portrait" (Fuller, 167). In *The Tramp* (1915), Chaplin courageously saves a young girl from crooks.

Then in *The Kid* (1921), he adopts an abandoned baby boy whose mother eventually comes to claim him. Ten years later, in his film *City Lights* (1931), Chaplin befriends a blind flower girl, causing him to steal from a millionaire in order to help pay for an eye operation. Through his attempts to challenge the homeless stereotype, it is safe to say that Chaplin's "wisdom, his sincerity, his integrity, all exhibited in his films, should go some way to revolutionize motion picture production in this country" (Hackett, 153).

Unfortunately, Chaplin's heroic personification of the tramp is an image of the past. These days, contemporary filmmakers often portray the homeless as soiled, middle aged, single white males, who suffer from alcoholism, drug addiction or mental illness and are homeless for personal reasons. Very rarely are issues of social policy or institutional discrepancies ever mentioned.

“One of the typical ways of portraying the issue is that the image of an individual with a unique circumstance is carefully chosen to illustrate the problem. Each story, then, becomes a dramatic documentary about unfortunate individuals” (Whang and Min, 121). Rather than exposing the social inequalities that exist within the governing body of power, the real issues become lost in the midst of individualism. Homelessness then, is portrayed as a personal problem as opposed to a structural one.

### **Stereotypes**

It is believed that “once an individual or topic has been stereotyped it will always be represented in terms of the stereotype” (Whang and Min, 97). While the media is responsible for the predominant distribution of these stereotypes, it must be noted that the media did not produce them; stereotypes are impressions that are created within our daily life. They work by “reducing people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by nature. Stereotyping as a signifying practice is central to the representation of difference” (Stuart Hall, 257). Essentially, stereotypes reduce a person to a few memorable and easily grasped characteristics by simplifying and exaggerating them in a fixed manner without change or development until they become accepted as the dominant representation. In other words, stereotyping “is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’” (Stuart Hall, 258). In turn, this helps contribute to the divide between “Us” and “Them”. What stereotypes represent are not beliefs based upon reality but ideas that reflect the distribution of power in a society; thus, stereotypes are not an expression of value but of ideology.

### **Ideology**

This use of the term ‘Ideology’ was first implemented by Karl Marx in his analysis of capitalism, in which he described how Western society is structured to benefit those with money at the expense of those without.



In a sense, “ideology is a more subtle and expansive way of saying politics, at least if we think of politics as the ideas or beliefs on which we base our lives and our vision of the world” (Corrigan, 97). It is this ‘world view’ or system of beliefs that is used to help make judgements about a society or rather, it is the image a society gives of itself in order to perpetuate itself. “Ideology uses the fabrication of images and the processes of representation to persuade us that how things are is how they ought to be and that the place provided for us is the place we ought to have” (Nichols, 1). Once it is understood that society is a system of rival power relations and competing ideologies, it becomes easy to see that each mediation has a political motivation behind it.

One of the reasons we have difficulty seeing the ideological construction of our world is because ideology strives to express itself as a reality; it becomes obscured in its own creation. In all language, for example, “there is a structure and each structure must have a foundation. The foundation of that structure is ideology. So when we analyse the structure of a media text, we aim to reveal the ideological basis of that text” (Lacey, 99). Clearly, the creators of media texts are aware of the values of the dominant ideological system, especially considering how it is their job to perpetuate them.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, “films and other art made under the sign of our dominant ideology are part of the series of representations by which our society hopes to maintain our investment in its perpetuation” (Nichols, 292). Hollywood films in particular are inherently ideological because they tend to consistently reinforce the dominant views of a patriarchal and capitalist lifestyle. Because every film is part of an economic system, it is also part of an ideological system. Film ideology is conveyed through images, scenes, characters, codes and narrative structure. For example, “camera positioning and lighting help frame Sylvester Stallone as a mythic hero in *Rambo*; an abundance of lower camera angles present Rambo as a mythic warrior, and frequent close-ups present him as a larger-than-life human being” (Kellner, 67). Looking beyond a film’s structural elements such as camera angles, framing devices and editing techniques, a strong ideological criticism also demands reading into character representations, plot strategies and moral configurations, for that is where the root of an ideology will hide.

Whether we agree or disagree with the values being expressed within a film, “the ideological critic maintains that these movies are never innocent visions of the world and that the social and personal values that seem so natural in them need to be analyzed” (Corrigan, 79). However, when we attempt to identify the motivations behind a film in relation to the expectations of the audience, the point of reference becomes extremely difficult to distinguish. “This merging of ideology and film is reflected in the first instance by the fact that audience demand and economic response have been reduced to one and the same thing” (Comolli and Narboni, 815). As such, ideology attempts to entice individuals into identifying with the dominant structure of values, beliefs and behaviour so that they eventually begin to exemplify it.

### **Hegemony**

This process of subconsciously internalizing the values of the dominant ideology is a concept that was further developed by Antonio Gramsci in the 1920’s and 30’s. He believed that the most successful dominant classes did not exercise their power through force or coercion but rather by gaining the consent of the masses. Because the working class did not feel intrinsically oppressed, they consented to allowing the dominant class to rule them. “Gramsci described the Western society as a hegemonic alliance between the rulers and their subordinates, in which the right of the dominant class to rule is accepted” (Lacey, 113). This concept of hegemony is used to show how, through images and texts, the consent to a dominant ideological position is won. Because white, middle-aged men dominate the majority of media outlets, the views of most media production naturally tends to reflect their bias.

“The values of the dominant classes become the norm through the conventions of representation used by mainstream media. It is through the media that the meanings which we use to make sense of our lives are often structured” (Lacey, 114). For example, the media’s continuous depiction of homeless people as lazy alcoholic thieves and crazy lunatics is the consequence of a capitalist bourgeoisie ideology. Hegemony naturalizes this ideological representation through the high frequency at which these views are expressed to the public.

The result of this eternal homeless stigmatism only works to further reinforce their subordinate position in society. If, however, representations of the homeless focused more on their lack of opportunity or the poor condition of social assistance programs, then maybe a more compassionate reading could be created. This is why hegemony is such an extremely influential means of social control and the reason distribution of power in a society is often accepted as 'common sense'.

### **Methodologies**

The intention of my production thesis is to make a film about homelessness that challenges the dominant hegemonic order and the current ideological representations that support its structure. However, before creating an alternative perspective, I must establish the ideological constitution that is currently in place. To do so, I will draw on a variety of methodologies to help craft a well-rounded evaluation of how homelessness has been represented in Hollywood films over the past twenty years.

Through my analysis of *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Muccino, 2006), *Big Daddy* (Dugan, 1999), *The Fisher King* (Gilliam, 1991), *Life Stinks* (Brooks, 1991), *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (Mazursky, 1986) and *Trading Places* (Landis, 1983), I will explore and examine the filmic codes and political motivations that work to establish the dominant ideology and perpetuate the myths and stereotypes that continue to marginalize the homeless community. It should be noted that the films I have selected were chosen specifically for their prominent portrayal of a homeless character or for their exploration of homelessness as a narrative theme. In order to ensure the most opportune method of establishing the 'current' ideological position, the scope of my analysis has been limited to films that have been produced within the past twenty years.

"The fact is there is no methodology that is 'native' to film in the same sense that linguistics is native to language" (Ehrat, 4). Nevertheless, just because there is not a signatory practice that is directly affiliated to the interpretation of film, does not mean there are a lack of tools to help read them. On the contrary, there are many: narratology, structuralism, psychoanalysis, formalism. They all analyse films as texts in conjunction to a larger system of signs and meaning.

For my research, I have chosen to utilize a variety of methods to help interpret each piece of film text. One of the primary methods I will be using is referred to as 'ideology critique'. Developed originally by Karl Marx and expanded upon by Douglas Kellner, ideology critique approaches media culture from a socio-political and economic context to help decode the relations of power and control that serve to advance the interests of dominant groups at the expense of the subordinated. "Reading media texts politically requires expanding ideological criticism to include the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, and class, and to see that ideology is presented in the forms of images, figures, myths, and the technical apparatus of film and other media forms" (Kellner, 93). Since the origin of its creation, film production has evolved into an extremely lucrative enterprise that has established a unified industry across the globe.

Throughout its history, many nations have exploited film as a tool to help reinforce current values in order control the dominant ideology. "Film is big business and its creation, its form, and its content are about power, the core of politics" (Kolker, 1). The production of film is part of an industrial process, where each movie is produced as a commodity whose primary function is to generate profit. The views, ideas and attitudes expressed in each film are seldom a reflection of the filmmaker's beliefs but rather a component of the corporations that construct them in order to appeal to the largest part of their audience.

"The results are then positioned for the most appropriate segment of that audience; marketed according to age, gender, race, class; and promoted and sold accordingly" (Kolker, 173). In the process, films construct desires and simulate fantasies, all of which are a reflection of the dominant ideology. "With a little study we can understand why and how our entertainments affirm or deny our beliefs. We can see that none of this is natural; it is all born of class, gender, race, education, acculturation, and the ideologies that drive us all (Kolker, 173). Therefore, by examining the power relations that govern media production, I will be able to gain a deeper insight into the origins and motivations behind the construction and perpetuation of homeless myths and stereotypes.

However, as insightful as the ideology critique may be, it will be utilized as more of a foundational method in order to establish a general understanding of media power relations. The predominant methodology I will be using is Douglas Kellner's 'multiperspectival approach'. As awkward as it may sound, the multiperspectival is an umbrella approach that draws on a wide range of critical strategies to help interpret, criticize, and deconstruct media texts. This particular method "draws on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony (1971), which presents culture, society, and politics as terrains of contestation between various groups and class blocks" (Kellner, 101). From this outlook, one is able to supply a spectrum of critical perspectives that help to offer a fuller, more complete, and potentially stronger reading. "It therefore follows that a multiperspectival approach will provide an arsenal of weapons of critique, a full range of perspectives to dissect, interpret, and critique cultural artifacts" (Kellner, 99).

For example, combining ideology critique with semiotic analysis will provide a deeper insight into how media culture and their semiotic codes are saturated with ideology. Therefore, reading films "multiperspectivally" can help provide an understanding into the ways that films reproduce existing social struggles as well as their reflection of the social and political dynamics of the times. Thus, each critical method affords an alternate angle to my approach and the more perspectives I can focus on a text, the better I will be able to grasp their ideological implications.

To help interpret the cinematic language of each film, I will be utilizing the methodology of film semiotics. Originally founded by the Swiss linguistics professor, Ferdinand de Saussure, Semiology borrows conceptually from research in linguistics and cultural anthropology. "Semiology in general is the science of meaning and film semiotics proposes to construct a comprehensive model capable of explaining how a film embodies meaning and signifies it to an audience" (Roth, 8). In the discipline of semiotics, it is believed that meaning is conveyed through the development of signification. Signification, therefore, is defined as "the human process of asserting messages by means of a system of signs. Signification does not exist in perception itself but in the sign values which perception delivers to us" (Roth, 3). Thus, it is the job of the film semiotician to decipher this system of signs by analyzing the filmic codes that are prevalent in each film.

However, it must be noted that “codes and messages in cinema are never experienced purely or in isolation; they are always found interwoven with others in a text” (Roth, 16). Only by “reading” the filmic text and deconstructing the codes, is one able to gain a deeper insight into the overarching message of the film. The basic conventions that compose the foundation for cinematic semiotics are montage, camera angle and movements, the scale of each shot, the relationships between the image and speech, and the sequence in which they appear. While my research will outline the use of these conventions, the majority of my focus will pertain to the motivations behind their arrangement and the subsequent meanings that are created in the process.

By combining ideology critique with film semiotics, my analysis will also be operating within a framework currently known as “political modernism”. As a theme that has become very popular in American film theory, “political modernism is the expression of a desire to combine semiotic and ideological analysis with the development of an avant-garde aesthetic practice dedicated to the production of radical social effects” (Rodowick, 2). Since the cinema functions on a multitude of semiotic channels, including photographic, speech, music and sound effects, it is believed that this strategic combination of semiotics and ideology critique allows for a more thorough understanding of cinema’s potential for either perpetuating or undermining the formulation and circulation of value systems under late capitalism.

“Strategies of semiotic analysis had been used to renovate genre and auteur studies of the classical cinema; now they must be mobilized to criticize the ideology of its forms and to pose alternatives to its system of representation”(Rodowick, 68). By approaching each film text from a political modernist perspective, I will be interpreting meaning “not as a product but as a process where the act of communication is reproduced within the structure of the message itself” (Rodowick, 52).

### **Hollywood Film Summaries**

In order to highlight some of the predominant stereotypes that Hollywood has perpetuated about the homeless, I have compiled a summary of each film and outlined the narrative techniques used to disseminate homeless stigmatization.

Produced in 2006, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) is the most recent film that attempts to tackle the issue of homelessness. Using a “rags to riches” narrative formula, it follows the story of a homeless father who struggles to raise his son while partaking in a competitive internship at an esteemed financial brokerage house. Inspired by the real life of a man named Chris Gardner, this film is a prime example of how the media portrays an issue of structural injustice through the story of an individual who is confronted with an unfortunate circumstance. In this case, the protagonist, played by Will Smith, becomes homeless after failing to pay his taxes as well as a backlog of overdue parking tickets.

As a result, the IRS infiltrates his bank account and withdraws the remainder of his savings. While living on the streets with his son, the protagonist secures an internship at a competitive brokerage house and after proving himself to be a hard worker; he is eventually offered a high paying job with the firm. Though the protagonist is able to work his way out of poverty, it is the other homeless characters that are positioned to further illustrate the perception of the homeless deviant. Aside from the soup kitchen and crowd scenes, the only other homeless characters in the film are paraded as psychotic thieves and aggressive derelicts.

The protagonist’s first encounter with a homeless person occurs when he asks a female busker to watch a piece of his sales equipment while he attends a job interview. Immediately after putting his trust into this woman, she picks up the equipment and sprints towards the subway. The subsequent meaning conveyed by her actions insinuates that homeless people are so desperate for money that they are not to be trusted with anything of value. The second encounter occurs when a schizophrenic homeless man steals the same piece of equipment from the protagonist, claiming that it is a time machine that will take him back to 1960. This character is mentally unstable and by presenting him as a psychotic fool, his disability is exploited for comedic relief. The protagonist’s third and last encounter with a homeless person transpires while he and his son are waiting in line at the homeless shelter. As they are being let in, an aggressive homeless man butts in front of them. When the protagonist confronts the man, he becomes extremely belligerent and resorts to physical violence.

By positioning the homeless characters as a vehicle for conflict, the protagonist is presented as the hero while the homeless are framed as the villains. The issue of homelessness then becomes misplaced amongst the struggle between the “good” homeless and the “bad” homeless. Using these three portrayals as a benchmark, it is clearly evident that the film’s representation of homelessness only works to perpetuate the stigmatized image of the deviant homeless person. Whether stealing or fighting, the conflict is not rooted in the protagonist’s struggle against systemic injustice but rather against the inconsiderate actions of other homeless characters. In this regard, the ideological significance is that homelessness is a personal issue brought on exclusively by one’s own financial neglect and with the proper amount of focus and determination, even somebody raising a child can work their way out of poverty.

*Big Daddy* (1999) is the story of a lazy underachiever who is forced to re-evaluate his lifestyle when a small child is mysteriously left on his doorstep. In the midst of raising the young boy, the protagonist slowly overcomes his immaturity and eventually grows to become a responsible parent. Though the film itself does not pertain to the issue of homelessness, there are two particularly offensive scenes involving a homeless character.

The first scene unfolds while the protagonist and young boy are on their way to Macdonald’s. As they are walking down the street, the young boy sees a dishevelled homeless man sitting on the curb beside a bag full of empty pop cans. The young boy stops and inquisitively asks the man why he is sitting on the ground. The homeless man politely tells the boy that he is homeless because of some very poor decisions that he made in his life, mostly involving the abuse of psychedelic drugs. Again, homelessness is presented as a personal problem in which the individual is responsible for their current state of living.

In his second appearance, the protagonist and young boy cheer for the homeless man while he barrels down a hill in a shopping cart, abruptly crashing into a pole and violently falling to the ground. Dazed, the homeless man stands up, mumbles, then faints. As he falls to the ground, the protagonist and young boy erupt into hysterical laughter.



The image of the homeless man whizzing down the hill is accompanied by the song lyrics “at a time when I’ve been down, I didn’t get too high. Kept my feet on the ground”. By overlapping these particular song lyrics with the homeless character’s negligent actions, the film insinuates that one could become homeless themselves if they were to get “too high” and not remain “grounded”. Once more, homelessness is presented as a personal issue whereby the homeless person is worthy of their position on the street and thus deserving to be laughed at when they are made into the fool.

*The Fisher King* (1991) is the story of a shock jock radio DJ named Jack, whose life spirals out of control when the advice he gives to a caller results in a murderous killing spree. One night, while going for a walk to clear his head, Jack is confronted by two hoodlums who mistake him for a homeless person. While being beaten and doused with gasoline, Jack is miraculously rescued by a crazy homeless man named Perry, who manages to fend off the attackers with a make shift bow and arrow.

However, after the attackers leave, an assortment of other homeless people emerge from the surrounding mountains of garbage, insinuating that homeless people are the equivalent to human pieces of trash with very little distinction between the piles of garbage in which they live. After taking refuge under a bridge, the group of homeless people begin to drink copious amounts of alcohol. During this scene, one of the homeless people lights Jack’s arm on fire and the entire group explodes into a fit of psychotic laughter. After Jack puts the fire out, a homeless man offers him a drink but when Jack refuses, the homeless man holds him down and pours the alcohol into his mouth, further perpetuating the stereotype of the hopeless alcoholic as well as the irresponsible degenerate.

From the beginning of the film, each homeless person is portrayed as a psychotic, barbaric savage. Even the character of Perry, played by Robin Williams, is a delusional schizophrenic who claims to speak with ferries. The only homeless person who appears to be sound of mind is a war veteran who panhandles in a wheelchair. However, during a conversation in a train station, the man in the wheelchair reveals to Jack that he considers himself to be “the red on a moral traffic light”. He tells Jack that he considers it his job to remind all of the people who pass by what their lives would be like if they decided to quit their day jobs and venture against the current of life.

The war veteran's sentiments further suggest that all those who are homeless are in that position due to personal choice as opposed to circumstantial tragedy or systemic insufficiency.

At the end of the film, Jack meets with a television executive who pitches an idea for a sitcom. The concept revolves around "three bums who are homeless because they love living on the street. They love the freedom and adventure and the joy of being liberated from the responsibilities of every day life" (*The Fisher King*, 1991). This pitch summarizes the ideology of the film. A film that not only glorifies corporate values but considers homelessness to be a romantic lifestyle of freedom and liberation. At the end of the film, Jack tells Perry, "I'm living a great life. I have a high paying job and a beautiful girlfriend". Like the other films, the protagonist's happiness is equated with money, success and power, which he eventually gains in the end.

*Trading Places* (1983) is the story of two wealthy executives named the Dukes, who conduct a bet that switches the lifestyles of a homeless con artist named Billy Ray with a well to do investor named Louis Winthorpe. The homeless con artist, played by Eddie Murphy, is introduced rolling down the sidewalk on a trolley, claiming to be blind and without legs. While harassing a pedestrian for spare change, two police officers lift him out of the trolley, exposing his legs and sight. After fleeing the scene, he is quickly arrested by a fleet of police officers. This initial introduction to Billy Ray's character works to perpetuate the myth that homeless people are cheating liars and thus undeserving of personal support. Shortly after, Billy Ray is then bailed out of jail by the Dukes and coaxed into a limousine with promises of whiskey. Billy Ray quickly accepts. When the Dukes escort Billy Ray to his new home, he immediately begins to pocket every item in the house. The Dukes remind him that he is only stealing from himself. Once again, the homeless character is portrayed as an alcoholic thief whose first impulse is to steal from a person who is trying to help.

While Billy Ray is settling into his new life, the Dukes sabotage their son in law Louis by clearing out his bank account and falsely accusing him of theft. As a result, Louis ends up penniless and on the street. Luckily, Louis befriends a prostitute and is able to secure a place to sleep. However, without the comforts and luxuries that he is normally accustomed to, Louis's sanity quickly begins to crumble.

He decides to pawn his watch in exchange for a gun and ventures to his company Christmas party with plans of retaliation. While at the party, Louis guzzles alcohol and conceals as much food as he can fit into his pockets. After causing a scene at the Christmas party, Louis puts the gun to his head and pulls the trigger. Luckily, it is not loaded. When he returns to the prostitute's house, he locks himself in the bathroom and attempts to overdose on sleeping pills. The significance expressed by his actions suggests that once a person becomes homeless, they will automatically transform into a crazy, alcoholic thief, capable of murder and suicide. The fact that he attempts to kill himself twice reinforces the ideology of the film in which a life without money is not a life worth living.

*Life Stinks* (1991) is the story of Goddard Bolt, a billionaire real estate developer who settles a bidding war with a rival executive by engaging in a bet that he can survive as a homeless man for thirty days on the streets of Los Angeles. During his first night, Goddard finds refuge under a pile of cardboard boxes. Unfortunately, his comfort does not last long as another homeless man urinates on Goddard's legs. In a desperate effort to raise some money, Goddard attempts to steal from the cup of a begging blind man. However, as he reaches for the cup, the blind man coyly slaps his hand away, revealing that he is not blind at all but rather just another homeless con man. While wandering through an alleyway in search of some food, Goddard is attacked by two street thugs who steal his shoes. As he is pinned to the ground, a crazy homeless woman emerges from a dumpster and chases the attackers away with a large stick, reminiscent of a scene very similar to that of *The Fisher King* (1991). After Goddard makes friends with the woman, she escorts him to the mission to obtain some food. While eating at the mission, the man sitting next to Goddard pulls out a bottle of alcohol and pours it into his soup. Once again, the stereotype of the alcoholic homeless man seems to be eternally present in each of these films.

After spending some time on the street, Goddard begins to lose his mind and physically attacks another homeless person. The police then take him to the hospital and hand cuff him to a wheelchair, at which point he begins to cry and repeatedly babble, "I don't want to live without my money".

Eventually, Goddard returns to his senses and after successfully spending thirty days on the street, he celebrates his victory by stealing a bottle of champagne, further perpetuating the myth that homelessness leads to a loss of sanity as well as morality. Shortly after, Goddard's nemesis organizes a gala to commemorate the development of his new urban renewal project. During the ceremony, Goddard leads a revolt of homeless people towards the party. Upon arrival, the homeless people immediately begin to pillage food and alcohol out of the hands of the guests.

In one particularly demoralizing sequence, a bottle of champagne tips over and a homeless man begins to lick the alcohol off of the ground. During all of this chaos, a television newscast is hijacked by a homeless man who looks into the camera and yells, "The rich were having a party in our neighbourhood and we fucked it up". Throughout this entire film, homeless people are framed as uncouth, alcoholic barbarians and only by reclaiming his riches is Goddard able to restore any form of peace.

*Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986) is about a homeless man who moves in with a dysfunctional Beverly Hills family after they rescue him from committing suicide in their pool. The film begins with an opening montage sequence of Jerry, the homeless man, eating garbage out of a dumpster and bathing in a public fountain. Sadly, Jerry's dog runs away while he is taking a nap in the park. When Jerry awakes to find that his dog is missing, he scours the neighbourhood looking for him. In a state of panic and despair, Jerry stumbles into the backyard of a Beverly Hills mansion, stuffs his pockets full of rocks and jumps into the pool. Seeing the action unfold from his bedroom window, Dave pulls Jerry out of the pool and administers CPR in order to resuscitate him. After Jerry regains consciousness, Dave serves him a hot meal and gives him some clean clothes. However, Jerry is unappreciative of Dave's generosity and immediately complains that the food is too salty and the clothes are out of style. When Dave asks Jerry how he became homeless, Jerry admits that he was arrested for selling draft cards in the 1960's, which lead him to start drinking and doing a lot of drugs. Without fail, homelessness is expressed as the result of crime, drug and alcohol abuse.

Out of sympathy for Jerry's plight, Dave offers Jerry a job at one of his factories. Nevertheless, Jerry refuses the offer, telling Dave that he couldn't handle the lifestyle. This response suggests that even with the option of an alternative, Jerry has chosen to remain homeless. While recovering from his suicide attempt, Jerry and Dave develop a genuine friendship. Jerry even takes Dave to the beach and introduces him to some of his homeless friends. However, in a scene reminiscent of *The Fisher King* (1991), Dave is forcefully coerced into drinking alcohol by all of Jerry's homeless friends. In an attempt to make Jerry more presentable, Dave buys him a new wardrobe and takes him to a stylist for a fresh haircut.

These physical transformations miraculously lead to a drastic change in Jerry's confidence. While Dave is at work, Jerry breaks the bond of their friendship and engages in extra marital affairs with Dave's wife. Then later in the film, Jerry overextends himself even further and has sex with Dave's daughter. Even after all he has done to help, Jerry still lacks any appreciation for Dave's generosity. Eventually, Dave becomes fed up and kicks Jerry out. Directly after leaving, Jerry begins to eat rotten dog food out of their garbage can, which prompts sympathy from Dave and causes him to invite Jerry back to live with the family. In the end, *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986) presents the notion that homeless people are lazy, ungrateful and not to be trusted.

After reviewing each film, it is alarming to see the volume of stigmatization that occurs throughout each story. In regards to the factors that influence homelessness, each character is presented as being homeless due to their own personal carelessness. Whether it is contributed to drug or alcohol abuse, mental instability or poor financial planning, not once is homelessness ever addressed as the result of a tragic situation or a structural insufficiency. In most cases, "contemporary American filmmakers routinely and most frequently portray the homeless as suffering from alcoholism and or mental illness and who are homeless for personal reasons—not due to the shortcomings of social institutions or the policies and power of the dominant social class" (Fuller, 166). By presenting homelessness as a personal issue, the audience is positioned to feel less sympathy for their plight.

As such, it is believed that “people tend to identify more with portrayals of homeless people where their life circumstances are attributed to social factors as opposed to individual factors. In addition, people tend to identify with homeless people who are not stigmatized” (Power, 79). However, the reality exists that certain stigmatized themes and plot conventions predominate the cinema. Whether it is the story of a rich person who becomes homeless as seen in *Trading Places* (1983), *Life Stinks* (1991) and *The Fisher King* (1991) or a homeless person who becomes rich as seen in *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986), *Trading Places* (1983) and *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), the universal ideology that each film follows is that homelessness is a personal issue and therefore anybody who is homeless should be looked upon as an outcast of society.

### **Ideological Analysis**

Judging by the continuous discontent that is perpetuated in each of the Hollywood films, it is disturbingly evident how little sympathy is provided to the plight of the disenfranchised. Instead, the homeless are repeatedly positioned as the personification of failure, as patrons whose poor choices have forced them to pay a life of retribution for their negligence. Not once is a homeless person presented as the victim. Nowhere is there any mention of child or spousal abuse, welfare, a lack of subsidized housing, or unlawful eviction. At no point is the audience made aware of any of the systemic factors that contribute to homelessness. Instead, each film recycles the same tiresome stereotypes. Void of any compassion, the depiction that is expressed in these films is just as ignorant as the people who are responsible for their production. And rightly so, for these films along with countless others are the product of a system whose ideology works to reinforce the “American dream” through hyper consumer capitalist ideals. From an economic perspective, homelessness signifies the antithesis of capitalism. Due to their lack of disposable income, homeless people live outside of a capitalist demographic. Therefore, Hollywood films are not created in the interest of a homeless audience. Instead, they are produced in order shape and align the public’s opinion with the interests of the governing bourgeoisie.

“The famous ‘window’ that the bourgeois cinema is supposed to open on the world is never anything other than a method of permitting the audience to live an imaginary life within a non-existent reality” (Rodowick, 86). Films, then, are produced in the interest of the dominant classes in order to help compensate for what the general public are missing in their lives. This form of simulated wish fulfillment may be oriented towards the sexual, political, emotional or visceral. Desperate for liberation, the audience wilfully surrenders in order to live vicariously through the characters on screen.

The economically dominant classes identify with and recognize themselves on the screen because its ideology is coextensive with their worldview, or the ideological position that empowers them. However, this cannot be the case for the disenfranchised classes—they identify with what happens on the screen (mechanically) but they cannot recognize themselves in it—and if they indeed submit to the impression of reality, it must be in the form of a “mystification. (Rodowick, 86).

While engulfed in this state of passive engagement, the audience is bombarded with a social reality that is constructed by and for the empowered classes. “Because it perpetuates an ideology in which their class position coheres in its domination of the economically disenfranchised classes, (cinema) is simply a bribe of identity or a fiction pacifying the proletariat” (Rodowick, 86). In this regard, “what the camera in fact registers is the vague, unformulated, un-theorized, un-thought out world of the dominant ideology. Cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates itself to itself” (Comolli and Narboni, 25).

By engaging in this passive cycle of wish fulfillment, the general public fall prey to the ideals of the dominant ideology. Over time, these ideals become adopted as a “common sense” worldview. For example, the public’s sympathy for the homeless will remain absent as long as the media continue to present them as deserving of their squalor. As such, Hollywood films are not made to help liberate homeless issues. In fact, the objective is the exact opposite. They are produced in order to convince the public that being homeless is wrong and that anybody who is homeless should be ashamed and embarrassed. By continually relaying this message to the public, the rich are able to convince the poor that they are personally responsible for their disposition and therefore deserving of their life in poverty.

This way, the proletariat become complacent and accept their position in the totem of society; content with the fact that their primary form of escape is through entertainment. “From the late nineteenth century onward, people have turned to film as entertainment, escape, and education – as an affirmation of the way they live or think they ought to live their lives” (Kolker, 1). However, the idea that consent can be won also allows the possibility for it to be withheld. Film and media text may act as a realm of struggle rather than an implementation of ideological constructs. The audience can become active participants as opposed to passive drones. Through their “active participation in the production of meaning, their capacity to resist ideology and to produce alternative, possibly subversive, meanings, becomes a key theme” (Perkins, 85).

The objective then, is to create films that challenge and influence the dominant representations and reveal operations of ideology, “to demonstrate that films have systemically served to reproduce oppressive images and partly to understand how it was that the oppressed groups came to collude with their oppression” (Perkins, 89). Only by focusing on these gaps and spaces of resistance is one able to fully engage in a contestation to the dominant ideology.

### **Semiotic Analysis**

“Societies manifest themselves to their members through representations. These representations are produced to satisfy wants. Wants are satisfied in the consumption of the representations produced” (Nichols, 285). During this process, a self-affirming cycle is formed that encourages individuals to construct their identities based upon the representations that are being put forth. “Identity is thus mediated by mass produced images in the contemporary media society, while image and cultural style is becoming ever more central to the construction of individual identities” (Kellner, 162). Within a comparable frame of reference is the use of ‘culture’ to refer to the widely distributed forms of popular entertainment that society draws upon in order to sculpt their notion of individuality.



Similarly, the idea of culture can be used to describe the unified values of a group or society, with a primary importance being “the production and exchange of meanings—the ‘giving and taking of meaning’—between the members of the society or group” (Hall, 2). Through the development of culture, a collective consciousness is formed. This idea of a shared set of cultural practices is very important, because it is the participants of a culture who provide meaning to the people and objects that exist around them. “It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them—how we represent them—that we give them a meaning. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring them” (Hall, 3). Films, therefore, and the representations they put forth, are a primary source of cultural codes.

These codes produce meaning through the structure of filmic conventions and while they may appear to be natural, it is only because they have been deeply assimilated into our particular culture. “Natural, analogical, and extrinsically motivated signs become illusions of the mind, which must be deciphered according to culturally learned and acquired habits” (Indem, 36). The use of character types, for example, is an illustration of how “characters are defined by what they represent rather than being genuine individuals” (Lacey, 133).

The question then, is not what films mean but how it is that an audience makes sense of what they see on the screen. “The cinema cannot show the truth, or reveal it, because the truth is not out there in the real world, waiting to be photographed. What the cinema can do is produce meanings and meaning can only be plotted, not in relation to some abstract yardstick, but in relation to other meanings” (Rodowick, 55). Therefore, interpreting film demands much more than deriving universal themes. It involves an investigation into the relations between cinematic representations and the social practices that they reflect. For example, “who gets to represent what to whom and why; what image, icon or person shall stand for what to whom are questions in a form that allows issues of visibility and cinematic representation to tie into issues of social and political consequence” (Nichols, *Reinventing*, 45). Sometimes a representation may even stand for that which has not yet been brought into a condition of visibility, even though socially present, as is the case with homelessness.

"Film, then, creates an existential bond between the signifier and the signified. Identifying signs and relating them to cinematic codes is central to semiotic analysis" (Roth, 20). It must be noted that codes may be cultural or specific to a particular type of film; there are general codes as well as subcodes. "A general code is one that can be used in any film. While a subcode is found in a particular film: for example, the image of a cowboy or gunslinger is found almost exclusively in Western films" (Roth, 15). In order to interpret and distinguish each filmic code, the film semiotician must deconstruct the many layers of assembly that constitute the structure a film. In a film's barest form, "the shot is the basic unit for the filmmaker and represents one level on which he assembles his films. Shots are then edited into "sequences" which represent another level of assembly" (Roth, 36).

Through this process, the cinema has created its own form of language; originating during the silent period, when the cinema made very little use of words. "Descriptively it could be observed of silent cinema that film produced meaning in a fairly systemic way without much recourse to verbal language to back it up" (Nowell-Smith, 10). This liberation from the spoken word was achieved by stringing shots together into sequences, which allowed meaning to be conveyed without words. As a result, the film semiotician "sees the shot not as a lexical unit but as an actualized unit. That is, one shot does not signify simply "girl" but includes instantly a complete physical description of her while perhaps including information about her immediate environment" (Roth, 18).

However, before exploring the critical text that appears in each shot, it is equally imperative to address the angle in which the shot itself is framed, as that is one of the first filmic choices a director will make. Throughout each film, the camera is rarely placed at the same level as its subject, it often appears at either a higher or lower angle in comparison to the actor. This filmic convention of angling a shot above the character, in which the camera is looking down upon them, makes the viewer feel more powerful. "Conversely, a low angle shot places the character apparently above the viewer, and can impress him with his power.

This system can be extended so that one character is shown (by low camera angle) as stronger than another (seen from a high angle)” (Izod, 57). This convention is very similar to the tactic of “the boss who places his employee in a low chair and stands up to lecture him” (Izod, 57).

The practice of strategically framing the homeless from a high angle is an extremely common technique that is used in each of the Hollywood films. For example, in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), the film begins with a wide establishing shot of a crowd hustling and bustling to work in the financial district. The camera slowly tilts down, revealing a homeless person sleeping on the ground in the middle of the sidewalk. Not only is the homeless person “invisible” to the crowd but because this is the first homeless person to be presented in the film, the use of the tilt down establishes the message that homelessness is an issue that should be discouraged. Also, by positioning a sleeping homeless person in the midst of a busy crowd, it reinforces the stigma that homeless people are lazy and inconsiderate.

In *Big Daddy* (1999), a conversation between a young boy and homeless man is deliberately framed using a tilt down. Even though the homeless man is at eye level with the young boy, the shot itself has not been composed to correlate with the perspective of their conversation but rather from the point of view of the audience member who is meant to be “looking down” on the homeless character.

In *Life Stinks* (1991), the film begins with a low angle of a limousine that is driving through the streets of downtown Los Angeles. The radio in the limousine is fixed on a news report that is discussing how the high unemployment rates are an indication of the current economic recession. As the radio host talks about the poor job market, the limousine drives past three homeless men and splashes them with a puddle. Framed in an angle that is tilted down, the homeless men jump to their feet as the title card reveals “Life Stinks”. In *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986), the homeless protagonist is introduced using a tilt down while he is eating out of a dumpster. These are just a few examples among many, in which shot composition is intentionally framed to “look down” upon on the homeless. By making regular use of the tilt down, the audience has very little choice in how they perceive each character. Whether conscious or not of the filmmakers framing decisions, the subsequent influence is still put forth.

Looking beyond conventions of framing and composition, a series of symbols manage to continually reappear throughout each of the Hollywood films. In semiotic terms, a symbol is a sign that has no visual connection to what it represents and is established entirely through social conventions. By definition, a sign is any physical form “that has been imagined or made externally through some physical medium to stand for an object, event, or feeling, etc” (Sebeok, 1).

After scrutinizing each film, one of most frequent symbols to appear is the stretched limousine. In each case, the limousine represents an element of high status and upward mobility. Often shown while driving through a slum, the limousine acts as a protective shell, allowing the passenger to maintain their status and safety while exploring the most downtrodden of locations. For example, *The Fisher King* (1991) begins with the protagonist pulling into work in a stretched limousine. While parked on the curb, a homeless man aggressively bangs on the window, begging for spare change. Because the windows of the limousine are tinted, the homeless man cannot see inside. However, he interprets the limousine as a status symbol and deduces that whoever is inside should be rich enough to spare a few dollars. This particular scene is an exceptional metaphor for the divide between classes. Similar to a gated community, the stretched limousine, with its dark tinted windows, is indicative of the comfort and protection that money can buy from the outside world. As the protagonist exits his limousine, the song lyrics “I have the power” boom in the background. As he struts to work in his sunglasses and expensive suit, the combination of song and image (a tilt up), frame the protagonist as a character of dominance and affluence. In a similar fashion, *Life Stinks* (1991) and *Trading Places* (1983) also establish the protagonist while driving to work in a stretched limousine.

In *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), the symbol of the limousine is replaced and updated by the image of the sports car. While the limousine represents comfort and luxury, the sports care characterizes those qualities in the form of speed, freedom and mobility. It is a more modern symbol of financial success. On his way to pick up his son from daycare, the homeless protagonist stands in awe as a man in a suit exits a fancy red sports car. The protagonist asks what the man does for a living, to which he replies that he is a stockbroker.

The film immediately transitions into a slow motion perspective of all of the stockbrokers laughing and smiling on their way to work. This image is mirrored by the protagonist's voice over, "They all looked so happy. How could I ever become that happy?" From that point on, the protagonist's pursuit of happiness becomes his quest for financial gain. The red sports car, as an extension of the lifestyle, is the trigger that sparks his aspiration to become a stockbroker. Again, this film, like the rest, expresses the ideology that money is equated with happiness.

In contrast to the sports car and limousine is the homeless person's use of shopping carts, wheelchairs and make shift mobile trolleys for transit. These devices represent an opposing image of class and luxury. For example, in *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986), the protagonist is introduced aimlessly pushing a shopping cart full of assorted possessions down a garbage-cluttered alleyway. Because the shopping cart is a symbol of consumerism, a sense of irony is instilled by the character's lack of disposable income. Similarly, one of the two protagonists in *Trading Places* (1986) is introduced while pushing a flatbed trolley down the street. Claiming to have lost his legs in Vietnam, the character's mobile dependency may also be interpreted as a metaphor for his reliance on society for financial support. In addition, the use of a wheelchair as a symbol for dependency is also applied in *Life Stinks* (1991). While struggling to survive on the streets, the protagonist experiences a nervous breakdown. After being taken to the hospital, he is handcuffed to a wheelchair and forced to wait in a hallway. This act of being handcuffed to a wheelchair could be interpreted as a metaphor for poverty. Whereby the handcuffs symbolize the shackles of misfortune and the wheelchair is representative of one's dependency on society to be "pushed" through life. Regardless, a dichotomy is clearly established between the rich and their limousines and the poor and their shopping carts. Levis Straus explains the premise of binary opposition "as an intellectual need to differentiate, the problem not what to oppose but how to oppose" (Rohdie, 473). As a society, we do this by grouping binary pairs based on similarities and opposites. These pairs of similarities and polar opposites are then related to other similar pairs and opposites. This process continues until sets of relations have been formed. Out of these sets, a structure can be discovered.

“People who are in any way significantly different from the majority, are frequently exposed to this binary form of representation” (Hall, 229). They become represented through binary extremes such as good/bad or civilized/primitive.

Another interesting symbol that continually circulates throughout these films is the role of Santa Claus. Normally associated with giving, Santa Claus is known for representing charity and generosity. However, that image is turned upside down in *Trading Places* (1983), when one of the homeless protagonists crashes a company Christmas party dressed as Santa Claus. Using the costume as a disguise, he stuffs his pockets full of food and alcohol until he is eventually forced to leave. In this regard, he exploits the pretext of the character’s generous nature in order to avert any suspecting gazes. While reversing the expectation, he converts Santa into a thief.

A similar theme is explored in *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986), where the film itself begins with a close up of a street decoration of Santa Claus, then tilts down to reveal the homeless protagonist pushing his shopping cart out of frame. Later in the film however, the homeless protagonist finds himself dressed as Santa Clause at a family Christmas party. While in costume, it is revealed that he has slept with the wife and daughter of the man who was gracious enough to take him in. Though this Santa figure may not be a thief of material possessions, he is definitely guilty of taking advantage of his host. In a sense, he is a theft of moral proportions, guilty of usurping the kindness of a rich man’s generosity. Nonetheless, his disguise as Santa Clause evokes a similar sense of irony as in *Trading Places* (1983).

Another fascinating symbol is the use of location to express internal conflict. On several occasions, the backdrop of a garbage dump is employed to further illustrate each homeless character’s sense of isolation and despair. For example, in *Life Stinks* (1991), the homeless protagonist finds himself scrounging for cover during a terrible rainstorm. After many failed attempts at securing a shelter, he eventually seeks refuge in some piping at the garbage dump. The result of the filmmaker’s decision implies that the homeless protagonist is the equivalent to a piece of human trash, whose only place of refuge is surrounded by actual garbage.

This theme is further exemplified in *The Fisher King* (1991). When two street thugs confront the protagonist, a homeless man emerges out of a pile of garbage and comes to his rescue. After the street thugs leave, an assortment of other homeless people materialize from the piles of trash that surround the area. In comparison to *Life Stinks* (1991), these homeless characters are not only surrounded by garbage, they actually live in it. Though the line may be difficult to distinguish, both *Life Stinks* (1991) and *The Fisher King* (1991) exhibit a world in which all personal value has been stripped from the homeless person.

Looking beyond framing conventions and reoccurring symbols, there are a variety of narrative themes that are repeated in each of the Hollywood films. A character becoming homeless as a result of a bet is present in both *Trading Places* (1983) and *Life Stinks* (1991). By accrediting homelessness to a wager, the onus of poverty is removed from systemic insufficiency and placed upon the individual as a victim of stupidity or naiveté. Homelessness is no longer explored as a social issue but rather as a challenge of urban survival.

Another theme that is often explored is the idea that homelessness leads to a loss of sanity. As seen in *The Fisher King* (1991), *Trading Places* (1983), *Life Stinks* (1991) and *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986) each of the protagonists are completely sane until they are forced to survive on the streets. This is a very misleading message considering it is often mental instability that leads to homelessness, not the other way around. Regardless, each characters' well being is dependant on their financial stability. Without money, their emotional foundation collapses; homelessness is presented as the breaking point to which they descend even deeper into despair. A prime example of its capitalist ideology, the balance in each of these films can only be restored when their financial status is re-established.

## Production Thesis

This result of Hollywood's continuously biased approach leads one to believe that "it is the independent film movement to which one must look to for the most progressive political interventions within the terrain of American film culture" (Kellner, 102). Rather than minimally exploring different filmic techniques or framing devices, contemporary independent filmmakers are also experimenting with alternative approaches to character representations, plot strategies and moral configurations. As a result, "a growing number of filmmakers are turning to fictional features, and it is in this movement that the most obvious direct possibilities for using film to help transform American cinematic culture are to be found" (Ryan and Kellner, 222). The necessity for innovation, particularly in film, involves the "process of re-inventing and re-constructing modes of representation and perception—conditions of consciousness—which are systemically denied within the terms of the current sociological and cultural reality" (Rodowick, 6).

As optimistic as I am, it is unlikely that alternative modes of representation alone can motivate political change. However, "what they can do is suggest alternative ways of viewing and discussing society and this *might* lead to political action" (Lacey, 116). To help strengthen the critical approach to my film, I will be following the principles of Douglas Kellner's 'critical multicultural approach'. A critical multicultural approach helps to analyze the relationships of domination and oppression, the way in which stereotyping works, resistance on the part of stigmatized groups to dominant representations, and "the struggles of these groups to represent themselves, to counter dominant and distorting representations, and to produce more positive ones" (Keller, 95). It demands the need to perceive the importance of engaging a broader range of types of representations in order to produce fuller and more critical readings of texts. A critical multicultural approach "points out that there are common forces of oppression, common strategies of exclusion, stereotyping, and stigmatizing of oppressed groups, and thus common enemies and targets of attacks" (Kellner, 97).



Therefore, a critical multicultural approach helps the oppressed see their oppression, identify their oppressors, and execute the objectives and practices that will guide them to liberation. Up until this point in time, “cultural studies has been especially negligent of developing strategies and practices for media intervention and the production of alternative media. Thus, cultural studies today should discuss how the media and culture can be transformed into instruments of social change” (Kellner, 336). This is precisely why I have chosen to produce a narrative film. With a narrative production, I have full control over formulating the characters and issues that I wish to represent and it will be through these alternative representations that I will be able to challenge the dominant ideological position. “This act only becomes politically effective if it is linked with a breaking down of the traditional way of depicting reality” (Comolli and Narboni, 816). One strategy I will use to contest the dominant beliefs is “to substitute a range of ‘positive’ images in exchange for the ‘negative’ imagery which continues to dominate the popular representation. This approach has the advantage of righting the balance” (Kellner, 102).

In relation to the films I have reviewed, each story presents homelessness as a personal crisis. However, in light of the media’s stance, homelessness is not an issue based on personal negligence; poverty and homelessness are created by human decisions and choices that determine how economic resources are distributed. While homelessness is caused partly by individual circumstances, it is paramount to identify that the foundation of the problem results from decisions made beyond the power of the individual. “If the homeless population contains proportionately more of the mentally and physically dysfunctional than the population at large, it is because they are the most vulnerable to systemic deprivation” (Fiske, 6). As such, it is my intention to tell the story of a homeless character that is moral and industrious but due to systemic insufficiencies, he is unable to secure adequate housing. The story itself is a character driven narrative about a homeless man’s struggle to survive on the streets. In order to make ends meet, he runs his own pawnshop out of an abandoned auto lot. The plot consists of a revolving carousel of characters that frequent his business and the subsequent conflicts they bring in tow.

Through the protagonist's personal interactions within this microcosmic community, the film exposes an alternative perspective to the stereotypical homeless experience that is conveyed throughout Hollywood cinema.

In order to insure the proper amount of authenticity, the plot and characters were inspired by real issues that are currently affecting the homeless community. For example, Councillor Jack Layton, who co-chairs Toronto's advisory committee on homeless and socially isolated persons, has said: "adding shelters is only a Band-Aid, a stop gap measure. We need the federal government to act and to act now to build affordable housing" (Hiller, A 19). This lack of affordable housing has resulted in families being placed on a "ten to twenty year waiting list for social housing" (Crowe, Cathy, A.18). Facts such as these were the inspiration for a scene between the homeless protagonist and his social worker, in which I wanted to present the bureaucratic process that each homeless person is dependent on in order to secure adequate shelter.

With regards to character representation, I approached the film in the same manner that Blaxploitation films attempted to reconstruct the image of the African American during the 1970's. Where "blacks are neither always worse nor always better than whites. They come in the usual human shapes—good bad and indifferent" (Hall, 271). That was the rationale when constructing all of the secondary characters. However, the protagonist was consciously designed in direct opposition of the homeless stock characters that appeared in each of the Hollywood films. Since the majority of homeless characters are frequently portrayed as dirty and dishevelled, the protagonist in my film is introduced while he is brushing his teeth. This was meant to demonstrate that just because somebody becomes homeless, does not mean they neglect to consider the responsibility of hygiene. The opening sequence of the film begins with the protagonist transporting his "goods" over quite some distance, exemplifying the daily effort that he puts forth in order to "go to work". When arriving at his destination, he meticulously arranges his items, taking pride in the presentation of his "business".

By creating a high traffic set up such as that of a pawnshop, my goal was to establish the protagonist as the nucleus of a community. Though quite a few characters come and go, the bulk of the narrative revolves around the relationship that develops between the homeless protagonist and a young girl who frequents his “shop”.

This girl and her overworked mother represent the growing population of single parent families who are currently on the brink of becoming homeless. While the little girl’s mother works double shifts to support the household, she is left alone and neglected. As a result of this neglect, the homeless protagonist finds himself providing food and proverbial wisdom about how to live a more cost efficient lifestyle. At the end of the film, it is revealed that the mother is terribly unhappy about this friendship and the homeless man is scorned due to the mother’s preconceived notions about homelessness. This scene is meant to demonstrate how homeless people are judged based on their financial status and not as the people they are. I wanted to create a sense of irony whereby the homeless man becomes this little girl’s guardian in replace of the mother who is too busy working to actually provide the daily support that she needs.

After the mother and daughter leave, a police car enters and sends the protagonist on his way. This scene was meant to demonstrate the homeless person’s struggle over public space. In each of the Hollywood films where a police officer appears, they are always provoked to the point where they are forced to apply physical restraint, causing the audience to sympathize with the officer and not the homeless person. In this case, the homeless protagonist is in full compliance of the police officer’s request. As a result, the issue of policing public space becomes the focus and not the deviant behaviour of the homeless person or the overbearing dominance of the police officers.

By revealing how the homeless protagonist is seen through the eyes of each character in the film, I wanted to create a context for the audience to question how they perceived him and thus, how they perceive homelessness. Because each of the other films present homeless people as thieving criminals or clowns to be laughed at, I felt very adamant about creating a character that exhibited noble behaviour; somebody that the audience could relate to.

In my approach to framing and shot composition, I made meticulous effort to evaluate how I was framing my homeless character at all times. “Indeed, every camera position, every scene composition, every editing decision, involves a representational strategy that embeds various interests and desires. Rather, films position the audience to experience and live the world in certain ways” (Ryan and Kellner, 218). In each of the Hollywood films, the tilt down was a customary technique used to frame each homeless person. The tilt down and tilt up both have the potential to be very loaded conventions. Knowing the power of persuasion that camera position can influence, the opening shot in my film was positioned to be a smooth and steady tilt up, slowly revealing the protagonist as a character to be admired as opposed to mistrusted. Throughout the rest of the film, the protagonist spends the majority of the story sitting in a chair. Because the film involves a myriad of characters approaching the protagonist while he is sitting down, it would have made logical sense to film a shot/reverse shot from a tilt up/tilt down position, thus simulating the eye lines of the conversation.

However, in an effort to maintain a neutral representation of the homeless protagonist, all of the shots that were filmed while he is sitting, were positioned to remain at eye level with the audience. This technique maintains an equal line of site and thus the audience’s perceptions are never tampered with. “The shot/reverse shot convention is such a powerfully established part of the institution of making and watching cinema that a clever filmmaker can tinker with it to provoke a specific reaction” (Kolker, 93). For example, while the protagonist and little girl are sitting down, their conversation is shot from a tilt up/tilt down, shot/reverse shot, in which the little girl is literally and figuratively “looking up” to the homeless protagonist. In terms of other shot conventions, the majority of the camera work is positioned to be steady and on a tripod. The only shots that were filmed with a “hand held” method were used to anchor the perspective of the drug addict character. This shaky camera technique was used to simulate the unsettled consciousness of his mental state. “It has also become commonplace to employ the shaky movement of the handheld shot as a visual metaphor in scenes where the script calls for the communication of fear” (Izod, 74).

With regards to format, I made a specific choice of shooting this production on black and white film. Though digital would have been a much cheaper alternative, I felt very strongly about recreating the visual aesthetic reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin's days as a hobo. Because homelessness evokes feelings of isolation and despair, I thought the stark contrast between black and white would provide a fitting context for the visual tone.

One of the more unconventional techniques that I utilized was the integration of documentary footage of real homeless people into the film. In order to anchor the story in reality and force the audience into truly confronting the issue, I decided to use documentary footage to help provide an accurate visual portrayal of the real people who are affected by homelessness.

Using my thesis film as a catalyst for the homeless, I strongly believe that media activism signifies an enhanced democracy, allowing those voices that have been silenced or marginalized to speak. Through the application of my research and the construction of alternative representations based on my analysis, I hope my film forces the audience to question their pre-conceived realities and attitudes towards homelessness and the homeless community. Because in the eternal words of Northrop Frye, "one who possesses such a standard of detachment from contemporary social values is in a state of intellectual freedom. One who does not possess it is a creature of whatever social values get to him first" (Frye, 286).

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## Production Thesis Script

Vagrant

A screenplay by Benjamin Young

CUT TO:

EXT. ABANDONED RESIDENTIAL STREET - MORNING

DELROY brushes his teeth and spits into the empty pool in front of him. He wipes his mouth with his arm and disappears into his shack. Delroy pushes a shopping cart filled with stereos out of his shack and onto the street. He passes a long succession of boarded up residential houses.

CUT TO:

EXT. ABANDONED CITY HOSPITAL - MORNING

Delroy continues to push his cart past an abandoned city hospital.

CUT TO:

EXT. VACANT LOT - MORNING

Delroy pushes his cart off the sidewalk and parks in front of an abandoned auto shop. He pulls the blanket off the top of his cart and smooths it out on the edge of the sidewalk. Very carefully, he lifts the contents from his cart and gently lays them onto the blanket. After everything has been strategically placed, Delroy sits down on an unfolded lawn chair and quietly begins to play an electronic hand held video game. Delroy looks up to see BUCKY walking towards him with plastic bags on his feet and a cane in his hand.

DELROY

What the hell do you want Bucky!

BUCKY

You hear about Henry?

DELROY

What about him?

BUCKY

He blacked out in a dumpster last night and got garbage compacted.

DELROY

That sounds like a crock a shit to me.

BUCKY

Na-uhn, Garnet told me. He said he saw the meat wagons and everything. But anyways, check out this crazy cane I got.

DELROY

Jesus Bucky, how many times have we gone over this!

BUCKY

No, I know but check this out.

Bucky tugs the handle and pulls a long blade out of the hallowed shaft. He smiles excitedly. Delroy shakes his head disapprovingly.

BUCKY

Now that's grizzly.

DELROY

I'm not gonna take the heat on that.

Bucky puts the sword back into the cane and leans on it while he quickly pulls a doll out of his fanny pack.

BUCKY

Okay! Okay! Okay, you don't like that, then at least look at this doll I found in the park last night.

Bucky holds up a very disturbing looking doll. Delroy puts his hand on his forehead.

DELROY

Bucky, Bucky, Bucky, you're in a bad way right now man and I'm not about to keep feeding your habit like this.

BUCKY

Well what do you expect me to do!

DELROY

Stop smoking crack!

BUCKY

Come on Delroy, you know how it is. Just this once, that's all I'm asking.

DELROY

I don't know what to tell you anymore Bucky.

BUCKY

But I thought we were boys?

DELROY

Well we're not. So get the hell outta my face!

BUCKY

Now that's some screw faced shit.

Bucky storms away in a huff. As he leaves, a ten-year-old girl named TRIXIE approaches pulling a small grocery cart filled with assorted children's toys.

DELROY

What's up Trix? Long time no see?

TRIXIE

Just Chillin'.

Delroy and Trixie execute a well-practiced handshake.

DELROY

Where's your mom at?

TRIXIE

I don't know, I think she's working a double.

Trixie silently paces on the spot while looking at all of the treasures on Delroy's blanket.

DELROY

Do you want to set up shop?

TRIXIE  
(Excitedly)

Yeah okay.

Trixie lays down a blanket and begins to unload her shopping trolley. It is filled with stuffed animals and children's toys.

DELROY

So how ya been?

TRIXIE

Worser I guess. I collected a bunch of tennis balls off the roof at school and started selling them back to everyone in my class. It's awesome!

Delroy

Right on.

When Trixie is finished, she fetches a milk crate and sits down beside Delroy.

Trixie's stomach growls a loud RUMBLE.

DELROY

Damn Trix, that doesn't sound good.

Trixie rubs her stomach.

TRIXIE

I never ate breakfast today.

DELROY

(Mumbles)

Alright, well here, why don't you run to the store and grab yourself a beef patty or something.

Delroy reaches into his pocket and hands Trixie a few loonies. Trixie takes the money out of Delroy's hand and stands up.

TRIXIE

Really? Are you sure? Do you want anything?

DELROY

No, I'm good.

As Trixie walks away, RUSSELL swaggers up to Delroy and leans on the sword cane that Bucky had tried to sell him earlier that morning.

RUSSELL

Eh Delroy, why you ain't buying shit off nobody no more!?

Delroy looks up from his game.

DELROY

Relax, it's nothing personal, I just need some bones to stand on.

RUSSELL

Yeah, no guff! Inventory's looking kinda light.

DELROY

Listen Russell, I realize it ain't what you know but who knows what you don't, and just 'cause you know shit don't mean you mean shit.

RUSSELL

Damn Delroy, That's cold man! Bidniss has been bad for ererybody. I don't blame you for that shit. But things don't change if things don't change.

DELROY

So what are you trying to say?

RUSSELL

Man, I'm saying we need to bank off it! You give me a list a what you need, I'll send Bucky out to get it, you buy it off him for tax, he brings the cash back to me.

DELROY

I don't know, lemme think about it.

RUSSELL

Man what chu don't know could fill a warehouse! Why think about it when you can be about it!

Russell takes a deep breath and calms down.

RUSSELL

(Cont.)

Anyways, you know where I'm at.

RUSSELL turns around and struts away. Delroy continues to play his game. Trixie returns holding a beef patty and a fist full of change.

She finishes her beef patty and hands the change to Delroy. Delroy looks up from his game and waves it away.

DELROY

Ahhh, don't sweat it.

TRIXIE

Merci beacoup.

Trixie sits down and fingers through the change. She picks out a few pennies and throws them to the ground. Delroy looks up from his game.

DELROY

What the hell are you doing?

TRIXIE

What?

Delroy points at the change on the ground.

DELROY

What do you mean what?

TRIXIE

Its just pennies.

DELROY

That's no excuse. Go pick 'em up.

TRIXIE

What for?

DELROY

'Cause I want to show you something!

Trixie gathers the stray pennies and hands them to Delroy, who pulls out a pair of scissors from his knapsack and begins to cut the edges off of one of the pennies.

DELROY

How much does it cost for you to ride the subway?

TRIXIE

I don't know, fifty cents.

DELROY

Then let me tell you something Trix, the key to making money is learning how to save it and a penny with the edges cut off works just as good a subway token. Check that out.

Delroy holds out the penny and coiled edge in the flat of his palm. Trixie grabs both and inspects them between her fingers.

TRIXIE

You gotta gimme these.

Delroy grabs them back.

DELROY

You wish!

Delroy looks down at his watch and jumps up immediately.

DELROY

(Cont.)

Oh shoot. Trix, I gotta meet my caseworker in half an hour. You think you can hold the fort down 'til I get back?

TRIXIE

Yeah! What should I do?

DELROY

Okay well if anyone asks, make sure you tell them everything's priceless. But you can work your way down to five on all of it. Think you can you handle that?

TRIXIE

Yup.

DELROY

Alright, I'll see you when I get back.

TRIXIE

See ya!

Delroy walks away. Trixie picks up the scissors and attempts to cut her own.

CUT TO:



EXT. UNDER A BRIDGE - EARLY AFTERNOON

The subway passes under a large bridge.

CUT TO:

INT. SOCIAL SERVICES OFFICE - NOON

Delroy sits in front of a pretty woman named GRACE. She has lots of eye make up on and an outdated haircut.

DELROY

So how much longer do you think it'll be until I can get into a place?

GRACE

Well Delroy, it's hard to say at this point.

DELROY

How do you mean?

GRACE

The city still hasn't received any funding for the new housing units. And until they do, this whole process is practically frozen. We've been over this before. You know the situation.

DELROY

Then what are my options?

GRACE

Well that's actually why I asked for you to meet with me today. There's a pilot project that's about to begin, where you would get priority two status at The Mission--

DELROY

(Interrupts)

--Oh my god. Are you serious? You know how much TB is in that place? You might as well move me into a refuge camp!

GRACE

I'm trying here Delroy!

CUT TO:

EXT. UNDER A BRIDGE - EARLY AFTERNOON

The subway passes under a large bridge.

CUT TO:

EXT. VACANT LOT - AFTERNOON

Delroy sits back down beside Trixie who is playing his Game Boy.

TRIXIE

So how'd it go?

DELROY

Not so well.

TRIXIE

Sorry to hear that.

DELROY

Ahh, it's all good.

TRIXIE

Hey, you still got me.

Trixie puts out her hand for a high five. Delroy chuckles to himself.

DELROY

Thanks Trix.

Delroy gives her a high five. Trixie's mother BECKY approaches.

BECKY

Trixie, where the hell have you been!

TRIXIE

It's okay mah, I been right here.

BECKY

Didn't I tell you to stay away from here?

TRIXIE

But mah, he's my friend.

Becky grabs Trixie by the wrist and drags her away.

TRIXIE

But Mom, what about my stuff?

BECKY

It doesn't matter!

Trixie looks back at Delroy as she is pulled away. After they disappear, a police car pulls up in front of Delroy.

POLICE OFFICER

Excuse me sir?

Delroy looks up from his game.

DELROY

How can I help you officer?

POLICE OFFICER

I'm gonna have to ask you to move along.

DELROY

Are you serious? But this is my spot.

POLICE OFFICER

Not anymore it isn't.

DELROY

Well, where do you expect me to go?

POLICE OFFICER

Anywhere but here.

DELROY

Alright.

Delroy packs his things up in a hurry and pushes his cart down the street.

CUT TO:

EXT. UNDERPASS - AFTERNOON

A man wraps in blankets sleeps under a bridge.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOMELESS SHELTER - AFTERNOON

A man warms himself on a sewer grate outside of a homeless shelter.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - AFTERNOON

A young boy begs for change while using a garbage bag for a sweater.

EXT. STREET -AFTERNOON

An old woman in a wheelchair begs for change on the street.

FADE TO BLACK

## **Production Thesis Shooting Script**

**Total: 3125 ft of film**

### **Scene 1: Cart Pusher (460 ft)**

1. MS: Bucky sleeps in a sleeping bag on a linoleum floor.
2. MLS: Bucky rolls over in his sleep. It is revealed that he is sleeping in the back half of a demolished kitchen.
3. MLS: Russell stands on a street corner.
- 4 (A). CU (SW) (100 ft): On a maple leaf and beer bottle frozen in a half empty pool. (ZOOM OUT and TILT UP) Delroy stands at the edge of the empty pool brushing his teeth. He gets up, spits into the pool and walks towards the entrance of a small shack (PAN RIGHT) Delroy enters the shack and quickly exits pushing a shopping cart filled with items for resale.  
\*Shot from SW (B) as well as SE (C).
5. MS (N, DOLLY RIGHT) (30 ft): Delroy pushes his cart out of the backyard and into the driveway. (Delroy turns into the camera)
6. LS (N) (30 ft): Delroy stops and stomps a rock out of his shoe. (DOLLY BEHIND Delroy) Delroy pushes his shopping cart past a succession of boarded up residential houses.
7. MLS (W, In the driveway between two abandoned houses) (20 ft): Delroy pushes his cart past the driveway.
8. MCU (10 ft): A mob of angry looking labour workers fill the wall of an old street mural.
9. MLS (20 ft): Delroy pushes his cart past a large mural filled with disgruntled looking labour workers.
10. MS (DOLLY IN, following Delroy from behind) (20 ft): Delroy pushes his cart down the street.
11. MCU (DOLLY OUT) (20 ft): As Delroy continues down the street, the camera remains fixed on all of the items that can be seen between the metal grate of Delroy's shopping cart.
12. MLS (PAN RIGHT) (20 ft): Delroy pushes his cart past an abandoned bakery with a painted mural.

13. MCU (10 ft): In the mural, a little girl hands a lollipop to a hobo clown.

**Scene 2: Lucky Bucky (720 ft)**

1. MS: (E, DOLLY from behind) (40 ft): Delroy pushes his cart down the sidewalk and veers into an abandoned auto garage.
2. MLS (SE) (30 ft): Delroy pushes his cart into an abandoned auto garage parking lot and parks beside the back of an old VW flatbed truck.
3. MS (W) (25 ft): Delroy reaches into the shopping cart and unloads two ghetto blaster stereos onto the flatbed of the truck.
4. MS (On the flatbed truck facing SW) (25 ft): Delroy continues to lay down an assortment of stereos, super 8 cameras and typewriters.
5. CU (S) (20 ft): A sun faded Santa Clause face hangs in the front window of the auto shop. Delroy unpacks his merchandise in the reflection of the glass.
6. MS (N) (25 ft): Delroy arranges his merchandise into an aesthetic showroom display.
7. MLS (N) (30 ft): Delroy grabs a folded up lawn chair off the back of the flatbed, unfolds it, takes off his knapsack, sits down in the chair and pulls an electronic hand held connect four game out of his pocket.
8. ECU (10 ft): Delroy's dirty thumbs punch away at the electronic connect four game.
9. MLS (SW) (30 ft): Bucky talks himself at the side of the building then walks towards Delroy holding a cane.
10. CU (SE, DOLLY IN) (30 ft): Delroy looks up from his game. Delroy, "What the hell do you want Bucky?"
11. MS (SW, DOLLY OUT) (40 ft): Bucky continues to walk towards Delroy. Bucky, "You hear about Henry?"
12. MS (Facing NE, DOLLY IN) (30 ft): Delroy, "What about him?"
13. MLS (Facing SW, DOLLY OUT) (40 ft): Bucky continues to walk towards Delroy. Bucky, "He blacked out in a dumpster last night and got garbage compacted." Bucky stops in front of Delroy.
14. MS (NE, OTS) (25 ft): Delroy, " (kisses teeth) That sounds like a crock a shit to me."

15. MS (SW) (40 ft): Bucky stands between an American and Canadian flag that flaps on the roof of the building behind him. Bucky, "Nu-ugn, Garnet told me, he said he saw the meat wagons and everything. But anyways, check out this crazy cane I got!" Bucky holds up the cane and smiles.
16. MSL (W, TWO SHOT) (40 ft): Delroy, "Jesus Bucky, how many times have we gone over this?" Bucky scratches his neck, "No, I know but check this out." Bucky tugs the handle and pulls a long blade out of the hallowed shaft. He smirks and slowly nods his head.
17. MCU (SW) (20 ft): Bucky holds the blade in front of his face. Bucky, "Now that's grizzly."
18. MCU (N) (20 ft): Delroy shakes his head, "I'm not gonna take the heat on that!"
19. MLS (W, TWO SHOT) (40 ft): Bucky, "Okay, Okay..." Bucky puts the sword back into the cane and leans on it. He quickly reaches into the fanny pack around his waist and pulls out a doll. Bucky, "...You don't like that, then at least look at this doll I found in the park last night."
20. MCU (SW) (15 ft): Bucky holds out a doll that looks like it is choking between his fingers. (RACK FOCUS to CU on the doll's face)
21. MLS (W, TWO SHOT) (40 ft): Delroy puts his hand on his forehead. Delroy, "Bucky you're in a bad way right now man and I'm not about to keep feeding your habit like this." Bucky, "Well what do you expect me to do!!??"
22. MS (NE, TILTED DOWN, OTS) (25 ft): Delroy throws his hands into the air, "Stop smoking crack!"
23. MLS (W, TWO SHOT) (40 ft): Bucky, "...Come on Delroy, you know how it is. Just this once, that's all I'm asking." Delroy, "I don't know what to tell you anymore Bucky." Bucky, "But I thought we were boys?"
24. MCU (NE, TILTED DOWN) (20 ft): Delroy, "Well we're not. So get the hell outta my face!"
25. MCU (SW) (30 ft): Bucky, "Now that's some screw faced shit." Bucky slowly begins to back away.
26. MLS (NW) (20 ft): Delroy shakes his head. Bucky turns around and storms away in a huff.

### **Scene 3: Trix in the Mix (430 ft)**

1. MS (NE, ZOOM OUT and PAN LEFT to MLS) (100 ft): Trixie approaches the auto shop pulling a small grocery cart filled with assorted children's toys. Delroy, "What's up Trix? Long time no see." Trixie, "Chillin'". Delroy and Trixie execute a well-practiced handshake.
2. CU (15 ft): Delroy and Trixie's hands bounce off each other.
3. MLS (N, TWO SHOT) (40 ft): Delroy, "Where's your mom at?" Trixie, "I don't know, I think she's working a double." Delroy, "That's cool."
4. MCU (SE, on the flatbed of the truck) (20 ft): Trixie inspects Delroy's display. (The display is in the foreground)
5. MS (NW) (30 ft): Trixie silently paces on the spot while looking at all of the treasures on the flatbed of the truck. Delroy, "Do you wanna set up shop?"
6. MS (SE, from the flatbed of the truck) (70 ft): Trixie, "Yeah, okay." Trixie begins to unload her shopping trolley onto the flatbed of truck. It is filled with stuffed animals and children's toys. Delroy (OS), "So how ya been?" Trixie, "Worser I guess. I collected a bunch of tennis balls off the roof at school and started selling them back to everyone in my class. It's awesome!"
7. MS (NW) (25 ft): Delroy, "Right on". Trixie sits down on a milk crate beside Delroy. Trixie's stomach growls a loud rumble.
8. MLS (N, TWO SHOT) (70 ft): Delroy, "Damn Trix, that don't sound good." Trixie rubs her stomach. Trixie, "I never ate breakfast today." Delroy reaches into his pocket and hands Trixie a few loonies. Delroy, "Alright, why don't you run to the store and grab yourself a beef patty or something." Trixie takes the money, stands up and turns towards Delroy.
9. MS (SE, TILTED UP, OTS) (30 ft): Trixie, "Are you sure? Do you want anything?"
10. MLS (N, TWO SHOT) (30 ft): Delroy, "Nah, I'm good, I'm good." Trixie walks away and Delroy goes back to playing his game. (PAN RIGHT to the window of the VW) Trixie walks away (ZOOM IN on the bullet hole in the windshield).

### **Scene 4: A snake in the grass (450)**

1. MS (S, PAN LEFT) (30 ft): The bullet hole is in the foreground and Russell approaches in the background.



2. MS (SE, DOLLY OUT) (40 ft): Russell swaggers towards Delroy holding the sword cane that Bucky had tried to sell him earlier that morning. Russell, "Eah Delroy, why you ain't buying shit off nobody no more!"
3. MS (NW, DOLLY IN) (40 ft): Delroy rolls his eyes and goes back to playing his game. Delroy, "Relax, it's nothing personal, I just need some bones to stand on."
4. MCU (SE, TILTED UP, OTS) (30 ft): Russell, "Yeah, no guff. Inventory's looking kinda light."
5. MLS (W, TWO SHOT) (60 ft): Delroy continues to look down at his game. Delroy, "Listen Russell, I realize it ain't what you know but who knows what you don't, and just 'cause you know shit don't mean you mean shit."
6. MCU (SE, TILTED UP, OTS) (60 ft): Russell, "Damn Delroy you're killing me here! Bidniss has been bad for ererybody. I don't blame you for that shit. But things don't change if things don't change."
7. MCU (NW, TILTED DOWN, OTS) (30 ft): Delroy looks up from his game. Delroy, "So what are you trying to say'?"
8. MLS (W, TWO SHOT) (70 ft): Russell, "I'm saying we need to bank off it! You give me a list a what you need, I'll send Bucky out to get it, you buy it off him for tax, he brings the cash back to me."
9. MS (NW, TILTED DOWN, OTS) (20 ft): Delroy, "I don't know, lemme me think about it."
10. MS (SE, TILTED UP, OTS) (50 ft): Russell, "Man what chu don't know could fill a warehouse! Why think about it when you can be about it!" Russell takes a deep breath. Russell, "Anyways, you know where I'm at."
11. MLS (W, TWO SHOT) (20 ft): Russell leaves in the direction he came from.

#### **Scene 5: Cutting Pennies (645 ft)**

1. MLS (N, TWO SHOT) (105 ft): Delroy goes back to playing his game. Trixie returns eating a beef patty. She hands Delroy the change. Delroy waves it away. Delroy, "Ahh, don't sweat it." Trixie sits down. Trixie, "Merci beacoup." Trixie fingers through the change, picks out the pennies and throws them to the ground. Delroy looks up from his game. Delroy, "What the hell are you doing?"
2. MCU (NE, OTS) (20 ft): Trixie, "What?"
3. MCU (NW, OTS) (20 ft): Delroy, "What do you mean what?"

4. **MLS (NE, OTS) (30 ft):** Trixie, "Its just pennies."
5. **MLS (N, TWO SHOT, LOW ANGLE) (80 ft):** Delroy, "That's no excuse. Go pick 'em up." Trixie "What for?" Delroy, "'Cause I want to show you something!" Delroy puts down his connect four game and pulls out a pair of scissors from the knapsack at his feet. Trixie gets up, gathers the stray pennies and hands them to Delroy. Delroy, "How much does it cost for you to ride the subway?" Trixie hands the pennies to Delroy and sits back down on her milk crate. Trixie, "I don't know, fifty cents."
6. **MS (NW, OTS) (50 ft):** Delroy continues to cut the penny. Delroy, "...Then let me tell you something Trix, the key to making money is learning how to save it and a penny with the edges cut off works just as good a subway token. Now check that out." Delroy holds out the penny in the palm of his hand.
7. **CU (15 ft):** Delroy holds out the penny and coiled edge in the palm of his hand.
8. **MS (N, TWO SHOT) (20 ft):** Trixie grabs the penny from Delroy's hand and inspects it between her fingers.
9. **MS (NW, framed between the American and Canadian flags) (25 ft):** Trixie holds the penny up in front of her face. Trixie, "Whoa! You gotta give me these".
10. **MLS (N, TWO SHOT) (100 ft):** Delroy grabs the penny. "You wish!" Delroy's watch alarms goes off. Delroy looks down at his watch. Delroy, "Oh shoot, Trix, I gotta meet my caseworker in half an hour. You think you can hold the fort down 'til I get back?" Trixie, "Yeah, what should I do?" Delroy begins to tie his boot laces. Delroy, "Okay well if anyone asks, make sure you tell them everything's priceless..."
11. **MS (S, from the flatbed of the truck) (40 ft):** Delroy stands up and turns towards Trixie. Delroy, "...But you can work your way down to five on all of it. Think you can you handle that?"
12. **MLS (N, TWO SHOT) (50 ft):** Trixie, "Yup." Delroy, "Alright, I'll see you later." Trixie, "See ya!" Trixie gets up and sits in Delroy's chair, she picks up the connect four game at her feet and begins to play.
13. **MCU (NE) (30 ft):** Trixie plays the game in the foreground, while Delroy walks away in the background.

#### **Scene 6: The System (285 ft)**

1. **MLS:** Two trains pass each other under a large bridge.
2. **MLS (N) (25 ft):** Grace and Delroy sit across from each other in a small office.

3. MS (E, OTS) (30 ft): Delroy takes off his hat. Delroy, "So how much longer do you think it'll be until I can get into a place?"
4. CU (15 ft): Framed family photo on her desk.
5. MS (SW, OTS) (70 ft): Grace puts the folder down. Grace, "Well Delroy, it's hard to say at this point". Delroy (OS), "How do you mean". Grace, "The city still hasn't received any funding for the new housing units and until they do this whole process is practically frozen. We've been over this before. You know the situation."
6. MCU (NE, OTS) (25 ft): Delroy, "Then what are my options?"
7. MCU (SW, OTS) (50 ft): Grace, "Well that's actually why I asked for you to meet with me today. There's a pilot project that's about to begin, where you would get priority two status at The Mission--"
8. MS (NE, OTS) (40 ft): Delroy, "--Are you serious? You know how much TB is in that place? I'd rather live in a refugee camp.
9. MLS (N) (30 ft): Grace, "I'm trying here Delroy!"
10. ESL: A subway passes under a giant bridge.

**Scene 7: Blame it on Becky. (325 ft)**

1. MLS (N, TWO SHOT) (60 ft): Trixie sits on a milk crate, playing Delroy's electronic connect four game. Delroy enters from behind the truck. Trixie gets out of his chair and sits on the milk crate. Trixie, "So how'd it go?" Delroy, "Not so well." Trixie puts her hand on Delroy's shoulder. Trixie, "Sorry to hear that." Delroy, "Ahhhh, it's all good.
2. MLS (N, TWO SHOT, in the reflection of the mirror) (65 ft): Trixie puts out her fist. Trixie, "Hey, you still got me." Delroy gives Trixie a pound. Delroy, "Thanks Trix." Becky storms around the corner towards Delroy and Trixie. Becky, "Trixie, where the hell have you been!"
3. MLS (NE, DOLLY IN) (40 ft): Trixie, "It's okay mah, I been right here."
4. MLS (SW, DOLLY OUT) (40 ft): Becky, "I told you to stay away from here?"
5. MLS (NE, TILTED DOWN) (20 ft): Trixie, "But mah, he's my friend."
6. MIS (SW, TILTED UP) (40 ft): Becky, "No he's not".

7. **MLS (NW) (65 ft):** Becky grabs Trixie by the wrist and pulls her away. Becky, "Come on, let's go!"
8. **MS (NE) (30 ft):** Trixie, "But Mom, what about my stuff?" Becky, "It doesn't matter!"

**Scene 8: 5.0 (250 ft)**

1. **MLS (N) (50 ft):** Becky and Trixie continue to walk away. Delroy sits in silence. A police car drives into the auto lot.
2. **MS (S, from the flatbed of the truck, OTS) (25 ft):** The car pulls up and an officer rolls down the window. Police Officer, "Excuse me sir?"
3. **MCU (N, through the police car window, TILTED DOWN) (25 ft):** Delroy, "How can I help you officer?"
4. **MS (N, from the flatbed of the truck, OTS) (45 ft):** Police Officer, "I'm gonna have to ask you to move it along." Delroy, "Are you serious? But this is my spot." Police Officer, "Not anymore it isn't."
5. **MS (N, through the police car window, TILTED DOWN) (25 ft):** Delroy, "Where do you expect me to go?"
6. **MS (S, from the flatbed of the truck, OTS) (25 ft):** Police Officer, "Anywhere but here." The police car rolls up its window and pulls away.
7. **MLS (N) (40 ft):** The police car stops at the edge of the sidewalk. Delroy angrily packs his things in a hurry. The police car pulls away.
8. **LS (S, from across the street) (40 ft):** Delroy pushes his cart out of the auto garage parking lot.

## Production Thesis Budget

### Below the Line Costs:

#### Film Stock

3200 ft at \$58.50 / 400 ft Core = \$468.00

500 ft at \$15.70/ 100 ft Core = \$78.50

Tax (14%) x \$546.50 = \$76.51

\$20 Kodak Shipping fee + \$623.01 = \$643.01

Film Stock Total: \$643.01

#### Film Processing

16mm B&W @ 15 Cents/foot x 3700 ft = \$555.00

Tax (14%) x \$555 = \$77.70

Total: \$632.70

Film and Processing Total: \$1275.71

#### Digital Transfer

Best Light Transfer @ \$400/hr x 5 hrs = \$2000.00

Total: \$2000.00

**Total Below The Line Costs: \$3275.71**

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### Above the Line Costs:

6 DV tapes @ \$6/DV tape = \$36.00

3 x Life 35mm film packs @ \$9.99/3 pack = \$29.97

2 x Polaroid Film packs @ \$36.99/2 pack = \$73.98

14% Tax \$139.95 = \$19.59

20 Tim Horton's Coupons @ \$5/coupon = \$100.00

Props: \$50.00

Costumes: \$50.00

Make Up: \$30.00

Catering: \$50.00

**Total Above the line Costs: \$439.54**

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Above The Line Total \$439.54 + Below The Line Total \$3275.71 = \$3715.25

**Grand Total = \$3715.25**

### **Vita Auctoris**

Benjamin Young was born in Toronto, Ontario on March 20, 1982. After completing his elementary school education at Frankland Public School and his middle school education at Earl Grey Public School, he entered Northern Secondary School from which he graduated in 2000. In 2006, Benjamin graduated from the University of Windsor with a Bachelor of Honours in Communications and a minor in Dramatic studies. He is currently a candidate for the Master's degree in Communications and Social Justice at the University of Windsor and hopes to graduate in the summer of 2008.